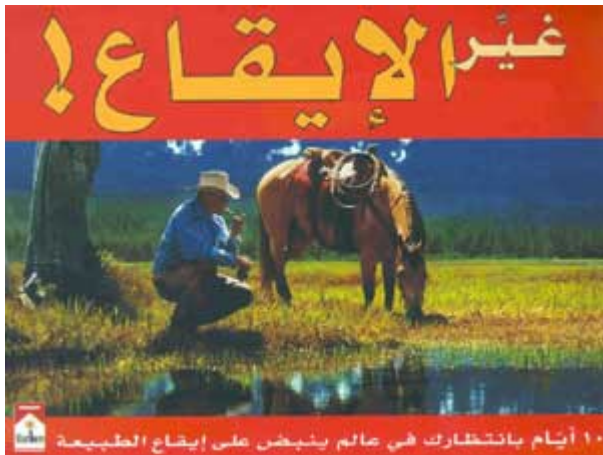


Viewpoint: Tobacco Marketing — Where There's Smoke, there's Deception



The arabic text of this advertisement reads: "Change the Tempo! Ten days await you in a world pulsating with the rhythm of nature".
(IDRC Photo: Linda Waverley Brigden)

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Recent recommendations by the Ministerial Advisory Council on Tobacco Control regarding the use of descriptors such as "light" and "mild" on cigarette packages are one more reminder of the tobacco industry's deception in marketing its potentially lethal product.

The Canadian government has taken bold steps to control tobacco marketing. Repeatedly, the tobacco industry challenges these laws. The new year began with yet another case by the Canadian tobacco industry in the Quebec Superior court—a case that challenges a 1997 federal statute restricting tobacco advertising and requiring precedent-setting visual health warnings on cigarette packages.

The European Union and Brazil have already moved to ban the use of terms such as "light" and "mild" for cigarettes. Not all countries are so fortunate in their government's leadership. The majority of developing countries have very limited laws to control tobacco and the marketing of tobacco products in many of these countries is reprehensible.

Selling "Marlboro Country" in Egypt

The tobacco industry sells more than a product—it sells dreams and the dreams are designed to lure individuals to a product that is addictive. Once consumers are addicted to tobacco, the industry has a guaranteed customer.

In Egypt, a bright red envelope was recently delivered to selected recipients. The package contained a sturdy cardboard binder with a Marlboro logo and a full-colour picture of a cowboy enjoying a cigarette beside a peaceful stream. The caption read, "Change the Tempo! Ten days await you in a world pulsating with the rhythm of nature". Inside the binder is an 18-page booklet, also in brilliant colour full of images of cowboys and stunning scenery. The booklet describes how individuals can win a trip to "Marlboro Country" or one of the many other prizes. The book

entreats contestants to "Come to Marlboro Country! Be free in its vast space. Discover nature that is like magic." For the vast majority of Egyptian citizens a trip of this sort, to scenery of the type pictured in the booklet, is far beyond the realm of possibility. But the dream is theirs to reach. All they must do is attach proof of purchase of five packages of cigarettes—"regular" or "light"!

In the same country, a campaign by Philip Morris Tobacco Company, ostensibly aimed at limiting youth smoking, distributes posters that state: "Less than 18—it's not acceptable!" "Over 18—it's your responsibility!" What teen wants to wait until they are 18 years old to make his or her own choices? The campaign is tantamount to waving a red flag in front of a bull.

Hooking women on smoking

Like many developing countries, smoking is a well-established habit among adult males in Egypt (44 percent of whom smoke). It is still socially unacceptable for women (with only 5 percent smoking), although the use of Shisha or the water pipe is fast becoming a fashionable way for women to socialize. A recent advertisement for Shisha in the Air Egypt in-flight magazine shows small boxes with pictures of colourful fresh fruit and mint leaves on the outside and descriptions such as "fruit/mint/apple flavour". A teapot in the center of the ad, immediately behind the hookah, leads one initially to think that the advertisement is for herbal tea. Not coincidentally, tea drinking forms a popular and pivotal element of social gatherings among Egyptians. The tobacco industry's efforts to inculcate the use of shisha into tea breaks is a carefully calculated strategy to incorporate this habit into the most fundamental and habitual of Egyptian behaviours.

Also like many developing countries, Egypt has only partial restrictions on the sale and promotion of tobacco products. While tobacco advertising is banned on radio and television, there is no restriction on the distribution of free products or samples, or on sales to minors. Promotion through contests and tobacco advertisements in magazines encourage men to continue smoking and entice women to contemplate more feminine forms of tobacco use. Thinly veiled tobacco industry campaigns pretend to discourage teen smoking.

Egypt is only one example of the insidious tobacco marketing that exists all over the world—but is seen more and more frequently in developing countries where population size, low rates of smoking amongst women, and a lack of legislative controls offer promising new markets to the tobacco industry.

Tobacco marketing and youth

The year 2002 will see further meetings of the International Negotiating Body assembled to debate the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This international treaty—the first to address a health-related topic—seeks to set global standards for tobacco control. Those standards will likely include a worldwide ban on the terms "light" and "mild".

In fact a major issue under consideration for the treaty is the limitation of tobacco marketing and promotion. It is well established that partial bans on tobacco advertising are ineffectual. The tobacco industry simply pours its energies (and its considerable financial resources) into other forms of promotion—sponsorship of sports events and beauty contests, promoting rock concerts or discos, distribution of free samples, placing their logos on t-shirts, backpacks and other items popular with children, sponsoring adventure contests such as the Egyptian one described above. In recent years the tobacco industry has avoided advertising bans in some countries by placing covert ads on the Internet. As well as making cigarettes easily available to underage, youth company

websites promote dance parties to lure people to venues where free cigarettes and other tobacco marketing activities take place.

The tobacco industry must reach people, particularly young people, with its advertising in order to addict the next generation of smokers—or "replacement" smokers as they are sometimes called. Their advertising images portray excitement, vitality, glamour and adventure. They aren't just selling cigarettes; they are selling sex, beauty, athleticism, prosperity, and freedom. Within these images of young, healthy, dynamic individuals, they are also selling death.

Global action to fight false advertising

There is no safe cigarette. The suggestion that a "light" or "mild" cigarette may reduce health risks associated with smoking is deceptive. Smokers who switch from a regular cigarette to a "light" or "mild" brand can expect to get the same dose of cancer-causing tar. Canadians should applaud their government's courage opposing this false advertising. They should also support global action to ensure that men, women, and children in other countries are not duped by these misleading descriptors. This includes continuing support for the leadership role played by the Canadian delegation in the development of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control—to ensure consistent controls on tobacco advertising worldwide—as well as the implementation of strong public education campaigns both at home and abroad to demystify advertising jargon and provide accurate information.

It's time to put aside the smoke and mirrors and tell the truth.

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